Opening Narrative for Your Sermon

Let me tell you about a time when twenty-eight ordinary men stared death in the face, and every single one of them came home alive.

It was August 1914. Europe was sliding into the First World War, but in London a quiet Irish explorer named Ernest Shackleton was loading a ship called the Endurance. His dream was bold: to be the first person in history to cross the entire Antarctic continent on foot, from one side to the other. He recruited twenty-seven men, sailors, scientists, a carpenter, a cook, even a stowaway who ended up as the ship's steward. They brought sixty-nine sled dogs and one tough little cat named Mrs. Chippy. On December 5, 1914, they left the whaling station at South Georgia Island and headed south into the unknown. Shackleton looked at his crew and made them a simple promise: "We are going to get every one of you home alive."

For a few weeks everything felt possible. Then, in January 1915, the sea turned against them. The Endurance sailed into a vast field of pack ice in the Weddell Sea and simply stopped moving. The ice locked around the hull like a giant frozen fist. For nine long months the ship drifted with the ice, powerless. The men hunted seals for food, played soccer on the floes to stay warm, and sang songs at night while the temperature dropped to forty below zero. Shackleton walked among them every day, making sure no one lost hope. He rotated leadership duties so every man felt he mattered. When supplies ran low, he made the hard calls himself so no one else had to carry the guilt.

By October the ice began to crush the ship. Timbers snapped like gunshots. Water poured in. On October 27 Shackleton gave the order they all dreaded: "Abandon ship." They salvaged three small lifeboats, tents, and what food they could carry, and stepped onto the floating ice. Three days later they watched their proud ship slip beneath the waves and disappear forever. Now they were truly alone—drifting on ice that could split apart at any moment, hundreds of miles from any help, with winter coming.
For five more months they lived on the ice like castaways. They ate penguin and seal when they could find it. Frostbite turned fingers black. Storms howled. Yet Shackleton kept his word. He never let the men feel like victims. He organized games, told stories, and made sure every man had a job. When the ice finally broke up in April 1916, they launched the lifeboats and rowed through freezing waves until they reached a tiny speck of land called Elephant Island. It was nothing but rock and ice with no food, no shelter, no rescue in sight. But they were on solid ground for the first time in sixteen months.

Shackleton knew the only chance was to go for help himself. He picked five of the strongest men, loaded the strongest lifeboat—the James Caird—with a month's supplies, and on Easter Monday 1916 they pushed off into the Southern Ocean. The journey was eight hundred miles of open, storm-tossed sea in a twenty-two-foot wooden boat. Waves the size of houses crashed over them. Ice formed on the sails and rigging until the boat nearly capsized. They bailed water day and night. Their navigator, Frank Worsley, steered by fleeting glimpses of the sun through the clouds. For seventeen brutal days they fought the sea. On May 10 they spotted the cliffs of South Georgia Island—but the wrong side. A hurricane was coming. So they landed on a beach, then Shackleton, Worsley, and two others climbed straight over the island's uncharted, glacier-covered mountains in a thirty-six-hour march with no map, no proper climbing gear, and boots held together by nails. They stumbled into a whaling station on the other side, filthy, bearded, and barely able to speak.
The whalers could hardly believe their eyes. These men were supposed to be dead.
It still took four long months and four failed rescue attempts before a small Chilean tugboat, the Yelcho, finally broke through the ice and reached Elephant Island on August 30, 1916. The twenty-two men left behind had survived on seals, penguins, and sheer willpower. When the ship appeared, they stood on the beach and cheered. Shackleton was the first man off the boat. He counted heads once… twice… and then he smiled. Every single one of the twenty-eight men was alive. Not one had been lost.

Twenty months after they had last touched land, the entire crew of the Endurance sailed home together.

Section 1: Real Hope Is Trusting God's Sure Promises, Not Just Positive Thinking

Ernest Shackleton was just a man. He made one clear promise to his crew, "We are going to get every one of you home alive," and he refused to break it. Even when the ship sank, even when they were stranded on ice, even when they faced the most dangerous seas on earth, he kept that promise and led his men to take step after difficult step. If an ordinary human leader could keep his word under those conditions and bring every single man home safely, how much more can we place our confidence in the living God who has never once broken any promise He has spoken?

This is exactly where real hope begins.
Many people today carry a weak or fuzzy idea of hope. They think hope is simply staying positive, crossing your fingers, or trying to think happy thoughts when life gets difficult. That kind of hope feels nice for a while, but it usually fades when the real pressures of life hit. It is like a faded photograph

in your mind. At one time it was a strong inspiring picture, but as life hits you, that picture fades and it loses the strength to carry you through the storm.

God offers us something far better, something solid and reliable. Here is a clear, practical definition of hope: Hope is the confident expectation that God will do exactly what He has already promised in His own Word, when we pray those promises back to Him and actively step forward in the authority and rulership He has already given us.

This can be done by committing to three very practical simple steps you can begin using this week.

First, open the Bible and find what God has already promised.

Second, pray those promises back to Him honestly and boldly.

Third, step forward in the authority and rulership God already gave you. In Genesis 1:26 God said, “Then God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Because God gave us this real responsibility, we do not sit still waiting for a special sign for every single decision. When the Bible gives us a clear command, we obey it. When the Bible does not give us a specific next step instruction, we take the next best wise step in the right direction. Then we trust that God will guide us, correct us if needed, and bless us as we walk.

One of the most beautiful and practical promises God ever spoke is found in Jeremiah chapter 29. The people of Israel had been taken away from their homes and were living as captives in Babylon. Their future looked completely hopeless. Yet God spoke these words directly to them: “For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes...” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

God did not say, “I hope things turn out well for you.” He said, “I know the plans I have for you.” He promised them a future and a hope, and He told them exactly how to receive it, by calling on Him and praying to Him with all their heart.

Jesus lived this way every day. He made Deuteronomy 8:3 the foundation of His life. That verse says, “… that He might make you understand that man

does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.” Jesus did not try to create His own hope or invent new ideas. He trusted completely in what God had already spoken.

This is what sets real hope apart from positive thinking. Positive thinking depends on our ability to feel optimistic. Real hope depends on God’s unchanging character and His proven track record of keeping every promise He has ever made. When you lose your job, when the doctor gives difficult news, or when your family is struggling, you do not have to simply try harder to think positive thoughts. You can open the Bible, find what God has already said, pray those exact words back to Him, and then take the next best step you can see while trusting in the authority and responsibility He has given you.

This is the kind of hope that does not disappoint, because it is rooted in the One who cannot lie and who never changes.

Section II: Hope Comes Alive When You Pray and Do What God Clearly Says

Once you have opened the Bible and found what God has already promised, the next step is simple yet powerful. You pray those promises back to Him honestly and boldly. This is where hope stops being a nice idea and starts becoming real in your everyday life. Prayer is not a religious duty or a last resort when everything else fails. It is the very way God has told us to lay hold of the future and hope He has already planned for us.

What makes this even more encouraging is that God is personally for you and wants you to succeed. He is not distant or indifferent. He is a loving Father who cares deeply about every detail of your life. Jesus made this crystal clear in Matthew chapter 6. Listen to His words: “For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink, nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow. They do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, What will we eat? or What will we drink? or What will we wear for clothing?” (Matthew 6:25-31)

Jesus is painting a beautiful picture here. God takes care of birds that do not

plant crops and flowers that do not work in a factory. If He provides for them so generously, how much more will He take care of you, His own child? This is not just a nice thought. It reveals God's loving disposition toward you. He is on your side. He wants you to succeed in the life He has given you.

Jesus reinforced this truth with a powerful story that shows how effective prayer is with a God who truly cares. In Luke chapter 18, Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to teach His followers that they should always pray and never give up. Here is the story: "Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, Give me legal protection from my opponent. For a while he was unwilling, but afterward he said to himself, Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out. And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge said. Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

Think about what Jesus is saying. An unjust judge who does not care about God or people eventually gives in because the widow keeps asking. If persistence works on someone who does not care about you at all, how much more will it work with God, who loves you deeply and is already for you? Your heavenly Father is not annoyed by your prayers. He welcomes them because He wants to answer and see you thrive.

This is why the promises we have already looked at become so alive when we pray them. In) God invites you to call on Him and pray because He wants to listen and restore. God says in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land." Prayer is the door God has opened so you can step into the hope He has promised.

Jesus gave us even more clear instruction on this. He said in Matthew 7:7-11, "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:7-11) God is not

reluctant. He is generous and eager to answer because He is for you.

When you pray these promises and take the next best wise step in the authority God gave you in Genesis 1:26, hope comes alive in a way you can feel and see. You do not have to sit still waiting for a special sign for every decision. You pray what God has clearly said, then you move forward trusting that the Father who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers is actively working on your behalf because He loves you and wants you to succeed.

This active combination of prayer and obedience is what makes hope become more than a feeling that you're clinging on to. It is practical, it is doable, and it works in the real world of bills, broken relationships, health struggles, and uncertain futures. You do not have to manufacture positive feelings. You simply open God's Word, pray what He has said, and walk forward in the authority He gave you. When you live this way, you discover that the same God who spoke those promises thousands of years ago is still listening, still caring, and still acting today.

Section III: God Is Right There With You, But He Gave You Real Choices, So Pray and Step Up

We have established that real hope begins when you trust God's sure promises and comes alive when you pray those promises back to Him. There is one more important truth that makes this hope steady and strong in daily life. God is right there with you in every situation you face. You are never alone. At the same time, He has given you real choices and real responsibility.

From the very beginning God designed you to be rulers. In Genesis 1:26 He said, "Then God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God did not create you to be a puppet that waits for instructions on every single move. He created you in His image and gave you His authority and responsibility. God must give you some distance so you can actually exercise the rulership He placed in your hands.

Jesus taught this balance clearly when people brought Him news of two recent tragedies. In Luke chapter 13 we read, "Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus said to them, Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell

you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:1-5)

The people who came to Jesus were asking the same question many of us ask when something painful happens: “Why did this happen to them? Were they worse sinners than the rest of us?” Jesus gave a direct and honest answer. The Galileans who were killed while offering sacrifices were not being punished because they were especially bad people. The eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam collapsed were not worse sinners than everyone else living in Jerusalem. Tragedies happen in a broken world for many reasons: our own choices, the choices of others, or simply random chance events. Jesus did not tell the crowd to blame God or to sit passively waiting for rescue. He called them to examine their own lives, repent where needed, and live wisely going forward.

This is incredibly freeing. God is right there with you as you move forward in hope. You pray because He is close and wants you to succeed. But you are not helpless. He has given you real authority and real choices, so you pray and then you step up. When money is tight, you pray the promises and then make a budget and take action. When a relationship is strained, you pray and then choose to speak kindly and listen carefully. When worry feels heavy, you pray and then take one small obedient step forward, trusting that the God who is with you will guide you as you walk in the responsibility He gave you.

Because God is right there with you and because He has equipped you to rule under Him, you can move forward with confident hope. You pray boldly because He cares, and you step up because He trusts you with real choices. This is how hope stays strong even when life is hard. God is close. He has given you real responsibility. And He calls you to partner with Him through prayer and responsible action.

Section IV: Hard Times Are Inevitable, But They Give Us Opportunity to Fulfill Our Purpose

We have learned that real hope trusts God’s sure promises, an the importance to pray those promises back to Him, and stays steady because God is right there with you while giving you real choices and responsibility. Now we need to understand one more important reality about life. Hard times are inevitable, but they give us opportunity to fulfill our created purpose.

Jesus was very honest with His followers about this. In John 16:33 He told them, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world.” Jesus did not promise a trouble-free life. He clearly said that in this world we will have tribulation, which means pressure, trials, and difficulties.

This is not a surprise or a mistake. It is part of living in a broken world.

This connects directly to why God created us in the first place as already established In Genesis 1:26. God created us to rule. He designed us to solve problems, to bring order, and to exercise authority in this universe. Problems are not just interruptions. They are opportunities for us to fulfill the very purpose for which we were made.
Even Jesus Himself did not live a trial-free life. His greatest purpose was fulfilled through the hardest trial of all, the cross. Jesus faced betrayal, false accusations, beating, and crucifixion. Yet through those trials He accomplished the salvation of the world. During those dark hours, Jesus anchored His hope in what God had already promised in His Word. He trusted the promise that He would rise again on the third day. He knew that if He remained faithful through the trial, God would fulfill His word and raise Him from the dead.

You and I have that same kind of purpose in our trials. The difficulties you face at work, in your family, with your health, or in your finances are not meaningless. They are the very places where you can step into the rulership God gave you. When you pray God’s promises and take the next best wise step forward in the authority of Genesis 1:26, you are fulfilling your created purpose. It is often in the middle of trials that you discover your destiny and see God’s power most clearly.

Hard times will come. Jesus told us they would. But because God is for you, because He has given you real responsibility, and because He has spoken unbreakable promises, you can face every trial with confident hope. Your trials become the soil where your purpose grows and your destiny unfolds.